Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) Submission to the Social Assistance Review Commission

Summarized by Erin Lam, McMaster University for the McMaster Community Poverty Initiative

A Moral & Ethical Approach

The ISARC sees the importance of living a decent a secure life. They believe poverty is a moral and ethical dilemma, and have proposed a more progressive and equitable social assistance system. This approach tackles Ontario's problem of too many people living in poverty, besides the fact that they work low-wage jobs or are on social assistance. Workers earning low wages are unable to provide a nutritious diet and afford to pay their rent, which has resulted in a lack of the basic social determinants of health and adequate living conditions. The stigmatized use of the social assistance program has also created a loss of dignity for many Ontarians.

ISARC argues that OW is more concerned with enforcing rules and surveillance rather than assisting people who need access to the labour market. OW has become the "first resort" for many, because of the lack of resources and inability to access other sources of income support.

**Transformations to OW:**

1. Improve Adequacy and Stability:

 - the program should be available to help recipients respond to emergency needs

 - stable and adequate benefits

2. Improve Program Integrity:

 - resources spent regulating and preventing misuse of the system should be spent in providing people with the services and support needed

3. Revise Eligibility Criteria:

 - the current OW program requires individuals to be almost totally depleted of their resources and is more likely to cause extended and deeper poverty

**OW as a Transition to Employment:**

1. Improved Accountability:

 - program must offer recourse when recipients are not offered programs most suitable for their needs (offering a better chance of being successful in the labour market)

2. Responsiveness to those with Multiple Barriers to the Labour Market:

 - a model that acknowledges and addresses barriers

Gendering the Ontario Social Assistance Review

They address and apply methods to improve the 4 key concerns that reflect a wide range of issues dealing with gender equity and social assistance in Ontario.

**1. A Gendered Equity Perspective**

They argue that gender cannot be considered in isolation from other serious equality concerns. Many women, particularly in racial groups, fact different a serious challenges. The concern is that many government policies do lack the recognition and do not support unpaid labour within the household and communities. Another problem is the current social policy, which ignores the fact that work in social reproduction, is undertaken primarily by women, despite the fact that they are contributing to society at large.

**2. A Strong Evidence-based Analysis**

This review emphasizes the positive impact of a strong evidence-based analysis; to ensure that social assistance programs are addressing and meeting the needs of Ontarians.

**3. Poverty Reduction**

The reduction of poverty has been proposed to be the ultimate goal in recommendations for change.

Other methods proposed:

- ensuring adequate benefits (particularly in social reproduction)

- acknowledging the importance and necessity for some women to remain unattached to the labour market in order to do the work of social reproduction

- allowing women (and their families) to seamlessly access adequate income support benefits

**4. Attention to Implementation and Access Issues at the Ground Level**

They argue that consideration is required in determining whether/how recipients can receive their benefits. The social assistance programs that have been set in place should not be a struggle to obtain benefits to which individuals are entitled.

**Other issues to take note of:**

- recognizing the complexity of the lives of women living in poverty

- recognizing the connection between poverty and violence

- recognizing the impact of how benefit units are defined and how benefits are delivered

- recognizing barriers to access: training and education